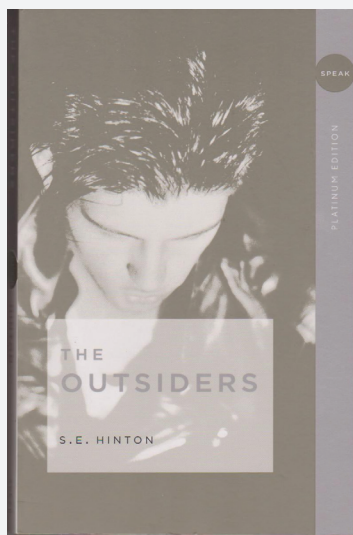


## Second Reaction: “Not All of Us Are Like That”: Othering Poor Violent Peers To Become a Proper Adolescent in *The Outsiders*

Hinton, S.E. *The Outsiders*. 1967. New York: Speak, Penguin Group, 2012.

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A teenager writing in the mid-1960s to other teens like herself, S. E. Hinton aimed to dispel adolescent stereotypes in *The Outsiders*, especially those of poor, white male youth. By showing the gang's love for each other, contradictions and nuances in their characterization, and the socio-cultural conditions explaining their circumstances, Hinton complicates what readers think about when they think about youth pitched as outsiders to the dominant culture.

Ponyboy's descriptions of his beloved brother Sodapop exemplify Hinton's intentions. Movie star handsome, he has a "sensitive face that somehow manages to be *reckless and thoughtful at the same time*," (7, emphasis added). Sodapop draws the attention of scores of girls at the garage where he works as a mechanic, but his faithful aims are on marrying Sandy, even though she does not love him the same way. He avoids trash-talking women like Two-Bit does, and he shuns alcohol because "[h]e gets drunk on just plain living" (8). And most importantly, "he understands everybody" (8). Yet, Sodapop loves a good rumble and cannot help but get into trouble with the gang whom he loves because he is rambunctious like a young colt. And, most painful for good-student Ponyboy, he is a high school dropout. Hinton writes, "Dropout'

made me think of some poor dumb-looking hoodlum wandering the streets breaking out street lights—it didn't fit my happy-go-lucky brother at all. It fitted Dally perfectly, but you could hardly say it about Soda" (23). Both violent and sensitive, a high school dropout, and someone who understands everyone, Sodapop's characterization guides readers to rethink our views of poor, street-fighting male youth in terms of contradictions and complexity born of growing up poor.

Early in the novel, when Cherry Valance tells Ponyboy, "Not all of us are like that," to complicate his view of the privileged Socs, this statement holds for the Greasers, too. By novel's end, after the heroic rescue of children from the fire, when Cherry Valance asks Ponyboy, "Do you realize how scarce nice kids are nowadays?" Hinton has led us clearly to the novel's message that, indeed, there are nice kids out there and many of them might even be Greasers. Despite contemporary stereotypes of adolescence (Lesko 2), and despite greasy-long-haired appearances, readers are meant to reevaluate poor, white male youth who do not look or always behave as nicely as their wealthier counterparts seem to be behaving.

But we are not meant to change our view of all poor, white male youth. (And definitely not our view of poor adolescent girls, most of whom are not even named in the novel.)

According to Hinton, Greasers are victims of socio-economic circumstances, and according to the Greaser motto, they know it. Late in the novel, when the gang is on its way to the big rumble with the Socs, the boys pick up varying lines of a self-characterizing narrative in the voice of society: "'Greaser . . . greaser . . . greaser . . . 'Steve singsonged. 'O victim of environment, underprivileged, rotten, no-count hood!'" (136). Still, though through Ponyboy's assessment, "half of the hoods I know are pretty decent guys underneath all that grease" (141). But the group that does not come off in victory, in Hinton's assessment, is the really poor, really violent youth in the neighborhood.

During the big rumble with the Socs at novel's end, Ponyboy begins a social evaluation of the guys involved on the Greasers' side. Recognizing the imminent dangers of the rumble, Ponyboy begins to note how many of his greasers do not belong in the fight. Darry, Steve, Sodapop, Two-Bit, and Ponyboy himself are not like the Shepard and Brumly guys fighting alongside them: his crew is just not as violent as the others. "We're greasers, but not hoods, and we don't belong with this bunch of future convicts" (141).

It pains Ponyboy especially to see Darry pitched against his once-teammate now home from college.

He wasn't going to be any hood when he got old. He was going to get somewhere. Living the way we do would only make him more determined to get somewhere. That's why he's better than the rest of us, I thought. He's going somewhere. And I was going to be like him. I wasn't going to live in a lousy neighborhood all my life. (138)

Like Pip, who reminds Ponyboy of the Greasers, Ponyboy has been “marked lousy” (15) because he is poor, but he is not going to remain this poor like most of his peers. As Karne Coats has observed, “anyone who has successfully integrated into clean and proper society is complicit in the creation of abject figures” (151). If Hinton’s aim is to complicate readers’ views of poor, white male youth, she succeeds, but only if those youth hold middle class aspirations like the Curtis boys.

When *The Outsiders* is read through a “youth lens” as prescribed by myself and my co-authors at AERA last year, we can see that, though Hinton explicitly challenges a lot of the stereotypes of poor male adolescence, she ultimately reinforces messages about the goals of a classed adolescence (Lesko 6) leading to “the promise of happiness” (Ahmed 11) far from the life of a Greaser.

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